Longtime independent department store getting out while on top

Abdalla's to ring up farewell sales

Barbara Abdalla Black remembers when a customer apologized for buying "on sale" after the oil bust in the early 1980s.

"It wasn't chic back then," Black said. "Then it became a trend."

Come Wednesday, the entire store's merchandise will be on sale as the last remaining Abdalla's store and the last of the Lafayette's Independent department stores prepares to close its doors.

It's not competition from big-box stores that prompted the close, Black said. It's strictly a business decision, she said.

"We thought this would be a great time to have a good send-off and go out on top," Black said. "Retail is trending down. You have merging chains. They're all fighting for position. It's just a fact of life. Those people can make deals that we can't. It's just part of a trend, and after 110 years, it's a lot more difficult."

The sale likely will continue through the end of the year, Black said.

"I like to think until we run out of merchandise," she said. "That's every retailer's dream."

Black was mum on future plans for the store's location, but said the property may not be courted the store.

Herbert Abdalla stands with his daughter Barbara Abdalla Black on Monday in the Oil Center Abdalla's store.

"We're too small for a major department store," she said.

In 1998, Black and her husband, Tom, and a partner, Charles Chaisson, took over operation of the store run by her parents, Herbert and Eveline Abdalla.

The store has 80 to 100 employees, the majority having worked for the family for decades. That loyalty made the transition smooth.

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Verna Castille, who has worked at Abdalla's since 1943, prepares for the store's final sale.

See a collection of photos from Lafayette landmark Abdalla's as it prepares to close its doors. www.theadvertiser.com

ONLINE

Share your memories

What is your favorite memory of shopping at Abdalla's? Send us an e-mail at news@theadvertiser.com or send a letter to The Daily Advertiser/Abdalla's Memories, 221 Jefferson St., Lafayette, LA 70501. Please include your full name and telephone number.
She started working at the downtown store, which closed in 1990, when she was 15. She's now 20.

"I thought I would outlast this," Castille said. "It's my family. They've been great people to work for. We've had fun.

Customers received letters Saturday explaining why the store was closing. That day, Castille started getting phone calls from customers and the counseling began.

"They've been calling me crying. They ask, 'Will you pass for you, will you come shopping with me? But I'm not a mail person,' I cry with them," Castille said.

Store windows that usually display the season's fashions were covered with paper advertising the going-out-of-business sale.

Black's grandfather, George Abdalla, started the family business in 1895 with the first store in St. Landry Parish. One by one, his sons opened stores across Acadiana and over the decades, one by one, they closed.

Black's uncle, Edward Abdalla, opened the Jefferson Street location. When her father, Her- bert, was 20, he joined his brother; it wasn't until 1987 that the Old Center location opened.

"I got out of this in 1990 and let the young generations fight it," Herbert Abdalla said Monday. He sat behind his desk in his office at the Old Center store.

He still comes into work at least a few hours a day to help out. "They die all right," he smiled and looked at his daugh- ter. "If she needed advice, I'd give whatever I had."

Black said she asked her dad's advice before making the decision to close for good.

"The last thing I wanted to do was be the one to end the legacy but my Dad being the busi- nessman he is, he said, 'Don't go down with the ship,' " Black said.

Her earliest memories of the family business were a Buster Brown shoe-size machine in the Jefferson Street store. "You'd stand on it and you'd look down and you could see the bones in your feet," she laughed. "I can remember try- ing on hats in the hat department."

As a teen, she started out in the gift wrapping department. She moved to Dallas for two years after college but couldn't escape the family tradition.

"I never knew anything else," she said.

One wish Black has is that more people would support local businesses. She said she can't help but wonder what dif- ference it would have made in her decision.

Her father agreed.

"The discounts, Internet and catalogs, people have so many choices," he said. Herbert Abdalla is still involved in the family's other ventures in real estate and an investment corporation.

"I couldn't sit around and do nothing," he said.

His daughter, now 20, plans to follow suit and has no plans for retirement.

"I am for him," she said, laughing. "I'm going to take some time off and decide what I want to do."

"Maybe I can't give away all my secrets," she said.

After a few seconds of silence, she added with a smile, "I'm not going to quietly fade away, that's for sure."